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Developing global practitioners: Addressing industry expectations of intercultural competence in public relations graduates in Singapore and Perth

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Abstract

Intercultural competence, defined as the skills required for an increasingly globalised world, is poorly understood in both higher education and in its value for different professions. The challenge for educators is how to develop such competence—as a kind of professional knowledge—through the curriculum. This paper explores industry expectations of intercultural competence in public relations graduates in two cities, Singapore and Perth, and offers useful insights into the perceived value of intercultural competence for public relations. The study highlights the need for intercultural competence, as both an understanding of cultural difference and as it applies to professional knowledge, to be incorporated into public relations curricula. The findings highlight the difficulties in offering a ‘national’ curriculum, which is then exported to other countries, and demand educators address the ethnocentric values and narratives of their discipline. These findings are significant given the internationalisation of public relations education and the need to prepare graduates for careers in public relations in a globalised world.

Keywords

Internationalisation; globalisation; intercultural competence; public relations; education; curriculum

Introduction

In a globalised workplace, intercultural competence, that is the “attitudes, skills and knowledge for effective communication and interaction across cultures and contexts” (Freeman, Treleaven, Ramburuth, Leask, Caulfield, Simpson, Ridings & Sykes, 2009, p. 13) is an important employee attribute. Intercultural competence embraces both “culture-specific and culture-general knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for effective communication and interaction with individuals from other cultures” (Paige, Jorstad, Siaya, Klein & Colby, 1999, p. 50). However, these understandings of intercultural competence are generic. The significance of intercultural competence varies across disciplines, as in addition to “a broad understanding of social, cultural and global issues...programmes preparing nurses or pharmacists are more likely to focus on the development of socio-cultural understanding” whereas for an engineer, the focus might be more on developing an “understanding of the global and environmental responsibilities and the need for sustainable development” (Leask, 2005, p. 119). In addition, educators working in transnational education must consider the demands and expectations of industries in different social and political contexts i.e. the professional practices and expectations in their field in each country the degree is taught when developing their curriculum. Yet opportunities for academics to engage with industries, in locations in which the degree is taught, are limited.

The focus of this paper is the development of intercultural competence in graduates in a specific discipline: public relations. Despite the internationalisation of higher education, the public relations curriculum is often designed to meet industry accreditation criteria in the university’s ‘home’ country, and does not address the diverse contexts in which the curriculum is taught (Wolf, 2010). Given public relations practices vary between countries, it is important not to rely exclusively on research and engagement with the Australian industry to inform the curriculum of a degree, which is taught transnationally and has a strong industry focus. An

understanding of the relationship between culture and public relations and a context-sensitive approach are therefore required for curriculum development. Diverse industry practices in different countries, changes in the industry in response to globalisation, and internationalisation of public relations education all demand educators address the ethnocentric values of the discipline, in order to develop a curriculum which prepares graduates for careers in public relations in a globalised world.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the curricular implications of transnational public relations education through research into perceptions of employers of public relations graduates in two cities, Singapore and Perth, towards intercultural competence. There are five sections. In the first, the concept of intercultural competence, as a desirable graduate attribute in an internationalised higher education system, is introduced. Second, the impact of globalisation on public relations is reviewed. In the third section, the impact of internationalisation and globalisation on public relations education is considered, particularly in the context of transnational education. Fourth, the analysis of employer perceptions confirms intercultural competence, as a combination of personal attributes, specific cultural knowledge and knowledge of professional practice in culturally diverse contexts, is integral to public relations practice in Singapore and Perth. The findings suggest intercultural competence must be addressed in the public relations curriculum.

Intercultural competence and the internationalisation of higher education

Increasing diversity in the student body, the recruitment of international students, and more recently, the trend towards transnational teaching i.e. teaching a degree in a country other than that of the home institution have led to the need for institutional strategies around

internationalisation (Leask, 2003), where internationalisation is “the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education” (Knight, 2003, p. 2). For example, many universities cite graduate attributes such as ‘global perspectives’ and ‘social justice’ relating to international outlooks, awareness of cultural diversity and a commitment to equal opportunity. However, the ability to define these attributes in relation to particular professions has eluded both academia and industry. Often, these skills are implied as ‘desirable interpersonal skills’ in job advertisements rather than explicit professional skills. As such, intercultural competence, as a professional attribute, escapes the formal structure of public relations education.

A literature review of intercultural competence suggests that the term embraces “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations” (Deardorff, 2006, p. 247), demanding specific “knowledge, skills and attitudes required for effective communication and interaction with individuals from other cultures” (Paige et al, 1999, p. 50) in a globalised world. Others suggest the development of such competence demands a ‘process of transformation’ (Liddicoat, Papademetre, Scarino & Kohler, 2003) and reflexivity where students “confront their beliefs and biases” (Bodycott & Walker, 2000, p. 87) and mindfulness where an “ongoing process orientation” or interaction between the personal and the interpersonal occurs (Deardorff & Hunter, 2006, p. 73) . However, these understandings of intercultural competence are generic and cross-disciplinary. The focus of this paper is the curricular implications of intercultural competence at the disciplinary—rather than the institutional—level.

The complex relationship between culture and education challenges educators working in transnational settings. Recent trends to delivering a degree, developed in consultation with the professional public relations association of one country (in order to ensure relevance to the

industry in that country and, in some cases, to meet formal accreditation criteria) in several countries demands curriculum designers consider the structure and relevance of the degree for both the diverse student cohorts and the diverse industry and practices (Wolf, 2010). Indeed, the process of delivering an 'Australian' degree in multiple countries demands educators contemplate the ideological underpinnings of their discipline. A major challenge for curriculum designers, then, is to negotiate the expectations of an industry or profession in their own country, university policies around internationalisation (which demand equivalence in learning outcomes, regardless of delivery location), and arguably, the expectations of the industries in the countries where the degree is taught. At the same time, Ege and Kitleh (2008) argue, educators should be wary of adapting their teaching for diverse student cohorts to accommodate different cultural practices as these differences can offer good learning opportunities.

The perspective of students involved in transnational education also needs to be considered. International students enrol in degrees from Western universities because they view them as prestigious (Dunn & Wallace, 2004); career enhancing (Wallace & Dunn, 2008); and transformative (Pyvis & Chapman, 2004). For students, the experience of different cultures is an important outcome of studying a 'foreign' degree. Therefore, adapting the curriculum for delivery in different countries i.e. attempting to ensure local industry relevance in degrees can be problematic:

The 'internationalising' of an Australian curriculum by incorporating content germane to the country where the program will be taught may not be of much use in facilitating the development of an international outlook, in constructing an international identity, or in meeting the needs of the students. If satisfaction for the customer is the mark of quality in provision, then, as the research has shown, 'local' content additions do not fully address

the desire of offshore students for exposure to international ways of thinking and practice.
(Pyvis & Chapman, 2004, p. 39)

Universities need to consider the curricular implications of internationalising higher education. There is limited research into the link between international experience (particularly in a higher education context) and graduate employability in a global workforce (Deardorff & Hunter, 2006; Caruana & Spurling, 2009). In one of the few studies, which involved interviews with students, academics and employers, the authors found that international experience could enhance employment opportunities because it allowed individuals the opportunity to develop cultural sensitivity and adaptability, but international experience did not automatically improve the employment prospects of graduates (Crossman & Clarke, 2010).

Public relations and globalisation

Public relations is generally viewed as a Western phenomenon, linked to market capitalism and dominated by practices and knowledge drawn from U.S. industry studies and scholarship (Bardhan & Weaver, 2011). However, recent public relations scholarship has acknowledged the impact of globalisation, and highlighted diversity in practices in different socio-cultural contexts (see Curtin and Gaither, 2007; Freitag and Stokes, 2009; Sriramesh and Verčič, 2009; Bardhan and Weaver, 2011). Yet, scholars often fail to recognise the regional nature of public relations activity (Schoenberger-Orgad, 2009) and “continue to treat nation-states as separate (rather than interconnected) and culturally static units of analysis” (Bardhan & Weaver, 2011, p. 5). In reality, public relations activity often occurs on a regional or global scale (Schoenberger-Orgad, 2009). Research into practitioner experiences in diverse settings is needed to understand the impact of globalisation on public relations practice in different contexts.

Sriramesh (2009) views public relations as explicitly multicultural and multinational, involving “strategic communication...with relevant publics many of whom are increasingly becoming culturally diverse” and global; he argues “an effective global public relations manager should be well educated and sensitized to communicating in a global environment” (pp. xxxiv, xxxv). However, the impact of the practitioner’s own understanding of, and experience with, culture and their ability to mediate and apply that understanding in order to achieve the objectives of public relations must be recognised. Kent and Taylor identify the inherent flaws in Westernised definitions of public relations:

To suggest that two-way symmetrical communication *a la* the U.S. is the most viable public relations model (ignoring other models such as dialogue, feminism, postmodernism, etc. which are only now receiving increased attention in public relations) misses the point of international public relations research. (2007, p. 18)

More research into the impact of culture on public relations activity in different countries, within the scope of a globalised notion of education and practice, is needed. Public relations practitioners, regardless of their backgrounds, are often thrust into the role of the communication mediator and negotiator, responsible for interpreting cultural dimensions of public relations activity. However, the dominant paradigm of public relations practice and education does not acknowledge the central role of cultural understanding in the development of effective public relations strategies. According to Daymon and Surma (2009), the practitioner role must be recognised as a negotiator of meaning where culture itself is a communication process:

This is because people are not passive receivers of public relations, nor are they robotic replicators of culture; they are always involved in active creation or re-creation of culture – and this, of course, involves individual PR practitioners too whose own interpretations

and understandings change over time. Culture therefore is both a stable and cohesive entity but also a socially enacted, dynamic process. (p. 11)

This understanding implies that practitioners need to develop certain personal and professional competencies in order to successfully communicate meaning in different cultural settings. These competencies allow the practitioner to become the proactive custodian of intercultural communication within their organisations, rather than a passive supplier of communications tasks, carried out under the umbrella of public relations. As such, the practitioner can play a greater role in developing strategic communication that allows for cultural meaning to take a central role in the development of relationships with stakeholders from diverse backgrounds. Starck and Kruckeberg (2003) agree, viewing practitioners as “educated global citizens” (p. 39). Intercultural competence should therefore be a significant graduate attribute in public relations education.

Internationalising public relations education

Educators need to understand different industry perspectives of intercultural competence and consider the curricular implications of globalisation and internationalisation for public relations education. A lack of reflexivity on the part of educators may result in a form of cultural imperialism, or a “‘West to Rest’ epistemic mindset” (Bardhan & Weaver, 2011, p. 10). The internationalisation of public relations education demands educators confront the values and narratives of their discipline; they must contemplate “reframing and decentering their own knowledge traditions” (Gough, 2003, p. 68), or a “decolonisation of the mind” (Flew, 2010, p. 6). A recent study of international courses in public relations curricula in 39 countries found that “‘globalisation’ serves as a euphemism for Westernization or Americanization of public relations

education” (Toth & Sison, 2011, p. 1) because of the ongoing influence of the U.S. public relations industry and scholarship on public relations curricula outside the U.S. A U.S. study found that “the current public relations curriculum does not help enhance a sense of global and cultural connectedness, [and] that the university general education requirements are ethnocentric in focus” (Bardhan, 2003, p. 170). As one example, studies into intercultural competence and public relations tend to focus on the need for intercultural competence when completing international public relations assignments on behalf of a U.S. company (see, for example, Freitag and Stokes, 2009).

Some research in Australia has begun to explore the curricular implications. One study investigated the pedagogical and conceptual implications of internationalising a second-year public relations unit; the authors found that a diverse student cohort, where students were encouraged to share their experiences, led to a richer learning experience and a questioning of normative approaches to the field (Fitch & Surma, 2006). A similar study, which considered the experiences of public relations postgraduate students in Singapore, Malaysia and Australia, found students “interpret[ed] theory and the application of it, through the lens of their respective cultures” and the curriculum needed to ensure their learning was relevant despite the diverse cultural contexts (Chia, 2009, p. 41). Another study investigated the preparation for public relations careers offered by a degree developed specifically to meet the accreditation criteria of an Australian professional association. That study concluded that the preparation of students at international study locations was inadequate for careers in the local public relations industry, where industry practices and expectations differ from those in Australia (Wolf, 2010). The aim of this project, therefore, is to understand the industry expectations of intercultural competence in public relations graduates in Australia and Singapore. The findings will be valuable for public

relations educators as they allow a review of the appropriateness of the public relations curriculum in an internationalised higher education environment where equivalent learning outcomes are necessary, even when industry practices and values—as in the case of public relations—differ across countries.

Methodology

This study aims to identify employer attitudes towards intercultural competence in public relations practice, in order to consider the curricular implications for public relations education in an increasingly internationalised higher education sector. The researchers used semi-structured interviews because they offered the opportunity to elicit the perspectives of employers of public relations graduates in two cities where their degree was taught. A copy of the interview question guide is included (see Appendix 1).

The research is qualitative as an in-depth understanding of the employers' perspectives, experiences and knowledge of intercultural competence in public relations practice was needed. The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with 17 employers of public relations graduates in Perth and Singapore over approximately one month in April—May 2011. Participants were recruited through the researchers' professional networks. Ten participants were based in Perth and seven in Singapore. They worked across a range of sectors including government, resource, health, technology, and not-for-profit and for a variety of organisations including multinational corporations, public relations consultancies, charities and government agencies. All participants were senior practitioners and consultants with experience in recruiting public relations graduates. Participation in the project was voluntary and potential interviewees

could withdraw from the project at any time. Ethics approval was granted by the researchers' university (ethics permit 2011/10).

Interviews were conducted by a research assistant in Perth and by one of the researchers in Singapore. All interviews were conducted face-to-face with the exception of one Singaporean interview, which was rescheduled and conducted on the telephone. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and participants were offered the opportunity to review and amend the transcription. The researchers conducted a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts in order to identify dominant and sub-dominant themes. The researchers compared and discussed their initial identification of themes, and re-analysed the data. They used the participants' perspectives and understandings to inform their understanding of intercultural competence and its relevance for the public relations industry in two cities, with a view to the curricular implications.

Scope and limitations

This study investigates the curricular implications of intercultural competence for public relations in an internationalised curriculum. The perceptions of employers who have responsibility for employing university graduates in public relations roles in Singapore and Perth are reported elsewhere (Fitch, 2012). These two locations were chosen as the researcher's university has significant enrolments in its public relations degree in these cities and a stronger understanding of industry expectations of public relations graduates was needed to inform curricular development. A significant limitation is the researchers' industry experiences are confined to the UK and Australia; however, they jointly have taught public relations internationally for more than 15 years.

Comparisons between the perceptions of Singaporean and Australian-based participants cannot be easily made or generalised to make definitive comments on the public relations industry in each city. Four of the Singapore-based participants are expatriates from Australia and India. Given the expatriate influence in the creative industries, and particularly in public relations, in Singapore (Chay-Németh, 2009), this sample is relevant. Similarly, some of the Perth-based participants have experience in professional roles in Asia. These examples illustrate the influence of globalisation, and the difficulty in discussing public relations practice in ‘national’ terms. However, the interviews reveal rich data about employer perceptions of intercultural competence and public relations, which can be used to inform the public relations curriculum.

Intercultural competence and public relations graduates

Personal attributes

Most participants identified personal attributes—such as openness, tolerance and adaptability—they would value in a potential employee when asked whether intercultural competence might influence a recruitment decision. For example, an Australian participant looked for “the willingness and openness to understanding cultural differences” while a Singaporean employer in the government sector, whose work involves facilitating visits from international delegations, perceived an “open personality” would allow the necessary flexibility to meet the demands of the role: “I think if you have an open personality and if you are able to adapt very quickly, you are flexible [and] I don’t think there will be an issue about having to deal with...Caucasians...Middle Easterners and so forth.” This openness was perceived as important even if one’s role did not entail working across national borders; public relations practitioners

needed to develop “the mindset and the sensitivity and the sensibility to be able to communicate with the people that are our population” in culturally diverse cities.

Participants thought that exposure to other cultures and other countries through study, work or travel could develop that openness. Often the informal curriculum and international experience were perceived as valuable as students are “taken out of their comfort zone...and when they come back they have a very different appreciation for working in multicultural environments as compared to people who have never stepped out.” One participant described a recent recruit: “her mind is so open because she studied abroad and we’ve got kids that study here and they just don’t have exposure to anything except the Singapore way.” However, several participants were careful to acknowledge that such a transformation – through international experience – was not automatic. Someone with “an innate sense of curiosity” and an “ability to question things, which I think is crucial for a communications person” might be “more open-minded than someone who has worked overseas.” But for many of the participants, the experience of living and working in, and even travelling to, other countries was considered valuable for professional development as it “can only help your skills as a PR professional.” It is much more common in Singapore to study overseas for all or part of a university degree, whereas Australian students tend to spend, at best, a semester abroad as part of an exchange program.

Knowledge and skills of specific cultures

Many of the Singaporean participants were bilingual or multilingual either through family heritage, formal study or the Singaporean education system which demands tuition in “mother tongue” languages. In Australia, languages are generally perceived as useful because of the exposure to other cultures, whereas in Singapore graduates were more likely to be recruited

on the basis of a specific language skill. Several participants agreed that the benefit of a second language was understanding cultural intricacies related to communication conventions.

When asked if a specific language might make a graduate more recruitable, participants in Singapore suggested that it would depend on the existing skill-set of the team, or the locations of their clients or public relations activity. In contrast, Australian participants in the government sector were unable to recruit on the basis of a specific language skill, unless it had been included in the job requirements. Participants in Perth and Singapore agreed a high level of English language was always necessary, and other language expertise could be bought in. Several participants identified a need for Chinese language skills: “If you want to do well with companies from China...you must make an attempt to learn some conversational Chinese.” However, as one participant pointed out, it wasn’t language competence as much as awareness of cultural nuances and protocols that were important. It was the practitioner’s responsibility to be aware of “all these protocols about how you deal with Chinese business people, Chinese bureaucrats, what’s acceptable, what’s not, what’s polite, what’s not, there’s a whole heap of protocol around that,” and to brief higher management accordingly.

Participants perceived a gap in the knowledge of public relations graduates regarding communication and engagement with Indigenous communities. In comparison with other parts of Australia, Western Australia—of which Perth is the state capital—has a high proportion of Aboriginal citizens (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007). Linguistic and cultural diversity within the Aboriginal community is high. Participants in the Australian government and resource sectors found it difficult to recruit “PR graduates who had any knowledge of the particular issues that related to communications with Aboriginal people.” One practitioner recruited “an Aboriginal person specifically for Aboriginal communications... to bring that understanding

about particular cultural issues.” A participant in Singapore who worked in the resource sector identified similar challenges, and recruited and trained staff who were members of Indigenous communities in developing countries to ensure the necessary intercultural competence in the regions where their organisation worked.

Intercultural competence, professional knowledge and industry practices

In a professional context, intercultural competence was perceived in terms of understanding cultural differences in order to communicate with, or engage, stakeholders effectively. For Australian participants, consultation and engagement were significant public relations activities and “you can’t engage, if you are not tuned in to the things that you need to be sensitive to in another person’s culture.” Similarly, public relations practice demanded testing “communication tactics on the target audience to ensure it effectively communicates with that public.” In this way, the participant suggests, cultural difference may be addressed. Another participant with regional responsibilities across several countries recognised that a regional communication strategy influences not only the language and media choices in a campaign, but that a culture- and context-sensitive approach may demand more targeted campaigns to address particular issues. For most participants, intercultural competence was perceived to “underlie a lot of techniques” of public relations: even relatively low-level, technical activity such as writing media releases demanded intercultural competence.

All participants perceived an understanding of “international, national and state affairs is critical for public relations professionals” as “the more you know in a broader sense, the better you are able to advise your employers...or your clients.” Participants attributed the need for this understanding to the impact of globalisation, as “more and more we are dealing in a digital world [without] boundaries.” They remained mindful of the potential global audience for any

communication campaign. At the same time, most Australian participants, and particularly those in the government sector, offered examples of the need to adapt local communication campaigns for culturally diverse groups: “when we do a campaign...we do things in different languages, up to 15 different languages.” When Singaporean participants described examples of the need for intercultural competence in a professional context, the examples tended to involve work with international delegations or clients, regional campaigns or in the diverse workplace. Few participants acknowledged the impact of cultural diversity within Singapore on their professional practice, with two participants describing local campaigns as “homogenous”.

Many of the participants had extensive experience working with other countries in a public relations capacity. In Singapore, the ‘regional’ role of many practitioners was pronounced as the city-state is the base from where many multinational companies launch campaigns across the Asia-Pacific region. One of the challenges of international business was the “need to understand the culture of the country in which you are working.” The public relations role often appears to be that of cultural intermediary (Hodges, 2006; Curtin & Gaither, 2007), particularly in terms of briefing colleagues about appropriate protocols. However, higher level challenges included “the strategic planning, the long term thinking and positioning is the really tough stuff and in an international context that’s really complex,” demanding in practitioners “the capacity to...understand the other culture.” In addition to cultural awareness, participants perceived knowledge of different public relations practices in international contexts as important, describing, for example, media relations practices, which highlighted the impact of diverse cultural, political and media systems on the public relations industry. In several countries in the region, it is ‘normal practice’ to pay for news stories or for journalists to attend press conferences, although such practices are not considered ethical in either Australia or Singapore.

Intercultural competence and public relations education

Participants were asked to suggest specific activities universities could incorporate into the curriculum to develop intercultural competence in public relations graduates. This question prompted some participants to question the limitations of university learning: “I don’t know how you’d teach that because you see it’s an entire experience.” University study, in any discipline, was perceived as valuable for public relations employees because students “learn how to think” and a foreign degree as valuable for Singaporeans because “it broadens their mind.” Several participants thought that cultural awareness should be integrated across a degree, rather than addressed through one unit, so that “each element of the courses...[look] at how this might apply in different cultural situations” in order to develop “an acute level of cultural sensitivity.”

Other participants questioned the value of internationalising an Australian degree, in terms of making it relevant for local contexts: “that degree is going to flop because people don’t see that association to Australia any more. And then people don’t see that value that they’re getting from this degree.” Participants perceived studying abroad (rather than studying the same degree in Singapore) meant that through the informal curriculum, students were exposed to greater diversity because “just having to stay there and having to communicate with people from different cultures would...mean that this person is probably more open and adaptable.”

Participants made suggestions to improve the public relations curriculum, offering an industry perspective with a focus on preparing graduates for ‘real work’ i.e. exposing them to industry practices and values through work-integrated learning activities. A significant challenge for educators designing curricula for transnational settings is the ways in which the public relations industry varies across different contexts. This challenge was recognised by the

participants who thought graduates needed to know “how do you deal with media in different countries” and “a lot of countries...would never do community consultation...and I think we need to know how other countries deal with their public relations challenges.”

Participants, drawing on their own experiences of higher education, identified the importance of authentic and complex learning activities and real-client and real-world projects “because [they] exposed me to a situation that I was not used to.” Opportunities for students to research other countries and cultures in order to develop a communication campaign, or other ‘authentic’ and ‘industry-relevant’ tasks were perceived as valuable. Multi-country campaigns and case studies were also important, partly because “in the digital age, we are not working in a local world anymore.” In the words of one participant:

Australians need to know that that's how a Singaporean might solve a PR problem because it's indicative of the different political systems and the different communication methods that you would use elsewhere. We need to understand their systems as well.

Similarly, opportunities for overseas field trips, international internships, or even work in multinational corporations, where it was deemed that organisational culture would vary greatly depending on the ‘home’ nation of the corporation, were considered valuable. All these suggestions exposed students to professional practices in culturally diverse settings. Study abroad programs, where students spent a semester abroad at another university, were perceived as positive in terms of personal development, but did not offer the same exposure to professional knowledge and practices.

In terms of specific cultural knowledge, participants felt that professional practices and information about culture and communication in significant countries in the Australasian region should be included in curricula. However, the cultures identified depended very much on the

participant's role and sector. A government participant in Singapore advocated a new unit that introduces:

cultural differences between say Singapore - so let's say you picked out a few big countries, Singapore, Japan, China, America, Australia and so forth? And I think what I would like to know is what are some of the things that I should take note of in the public relations context.

Government and resource sector participants in Australia, who frequently had to consult with Aboriginal communities or work with Aboriginal clients, and the Singaporean participant who worked in the resource sector, recommended specific knowledge of the communication challenges in working with Indigenous communities, and the non-government organisations who often represent them, be included in public relations curricula. Several participants in Singapore and Australia identified as useful to include: "a particular topic on how to deal with the Chinese...if you host a special visit with the Chinese, what are some of the things you should take note of?" All participants expected public relations graduates to have a broad awareness of, and interest in not only cultural difference but news, current affairs and world politics: "If you're studying public relations and communications, you've got to have some context of the globe, because it's a global communications era. So you've got to have some feeling of how it all fits together."

A reflexive approach was perceived as important for public relations practitioners, as "understanding, particularly in PR, how the governments work in other countries...as it relates to communications. A lot of us take for granted the democracy we have here." Another participant commented: "I think PR people need to understand... how we communicate with people from

those countries that live here because they're not used to being involved in things, they're not used to being asked.”

All participants perceived the need to develop intercultural competence as “an acute level of cultural sensitivity that underlies the technical skills” of public relations through public relations education. Writing is one such example of a technical skill; public relations students should learn “to write in a culturally aware way that doesn’t perpetuate any form of discrimination ...[and] understand equity and human rights, and how that is applied in public relations.” One participant identified “the main challenge” in educating future practitioners as “language and cultural nuance... you could almost run a foundation unit in sort of cultural awareness and cultural nuance, and respect, they’re just simple things that people don’t get.”

Discussion and conclusions

This study reports employer perceptions of the value of intercultural competence for public relations. The findings, drawn from the analysis of interviews conducted with 17 participants experienced in the recruitment of graduates in Singapore and Perth, highlight the relevance of intercultural competence to public relations practice in two cities. This study is unique in that it draws on the perceptions of industry practitioners in different – and culturally very diverse – countries, in two cities with multicultural and international public relations activity. The cities are significant in terms of global productivity and regional commerce, and have many links. This study therefore explores public relations practice in transnational and transcultural, rather than in national, contexts.

Employers' expectations of potential employees reveal the need for intercultural competence specific to public relations practice, in addition to interpersonal attributes. Intercultural competence is perceived as important not only in international work, but in increasingly multicultural settings such as Singapore and Perth. This finding is significant in relation to the development of curricula that aims to develop intercultural competence in graduates across a range of international education settings. The need for intercultural competence in public relations demands educators consider the contexts in which they teach and in which their graduates will work. Graduates require both specific and general intercultural competence in relation to professional knowledge. For example, the need to understand specific cultural settings, such as Indigenous cultures and in business dealings with China, was reported by participants in both Perth and Singapore, suggesting educators in the Australasian region could usefully incorporate specific cultural knowledge and examples of these cultures into the public relations curriculum. At the same time, graduates require conceptual knowledge which allows them to apply intercultural competence to new contexts and new cultures. Thus educators need to develop in public relations students the ability to understand the intricacies of local contexts and to apply a wider global perspective to practice.

The public relations degree at the researchers' university aims to develop students into socially responsible practitioners who can adapt to the diverse demands of the public relations profession in an increasingly globalised world. Ideally, graduates of this degree are effective professionals who can communicate across a range of social and cultural contexts, and are informed, versatile and reflexive industry professionals. However, a particular challenge for curricular development at this university is that the public relations degree is taught in four countries. The answer to addressing this challenge lies in embedding intercultural competence as

an explicit learning outcome in the course. The development of intercultural competence demands educators are aware of diverse professional practices, the different contexts for those practices (and indeed, the impact of different socio-cultural factors), and industry expectations and values, which vary across countries and sectors. The public relations discipline has until now been strongly influenced by U.S. scholarship and practice. The introduction of intercultural competence into the public relations curriculum demands new ways of thinking about public relations.

In response to the findings in this study, we plan to introduce a new unit which highlights the significant relationship between public relations and culture. Not only will public relations be presented as a cultural activity, incorporating recent scholarship exploring the impact of globalisation on the field, but it will include specific cultural knowledge in relation to different cultures in the Australasian region, including Indigenous and Chinese cultures. Students will learn not only about contrasting approaches to industry challenges and expectations around community consultation, stakeholder engagement, communication management, media relations and public affairs, but they will also be encouraged to reflect on their own understanding of public relations, and explore the ideology and values underpinning various approaches to the field. In addition, we plan to develop international work-integrated learning opportunities for students including field trips, internships and real-client projects.

This study has introduced industry perspectives to the internationalisation of public relations curricula. While limited to employer perspectives in two cities, the study offers useful insights into the perceived value of intercultural competence in relation to public relations practice and employer expectations of public relations graduates in Singapore and Perth, Australia. The study highlights the need for intercultural competence, as both an understanding

of cultural difference and as it applies to professional knowledge, to be incorporated into public relations curricula in order to prepare graduates for public relations in an increasingly globalised world. Educators cannot rely on the demands of a national professional association or ignore the ethnocentrism of their discipline when developing curriculum. This finding is significant given the internationalisation of public relations education. The ways in which intercultural competence should be scaffolded, and how 'industry relevance' might be incorporated in a public relations degree taught in multiple countries, demands further research.

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Appendix One: Question guide for ‘Internationalisation and the public relations curriculum’ project

1. Can you give me some examples from your work where you have had to work or communicate with culturally and linguistically diverse groups?
2. Can you give me some examples from your work where you have had to work or communicate with people in, or from, other countries?
3. Do you think that people working in public relations or communication need an understanding of international issues? Why?
4. Are there activities, which have assisted you in gaining an international perspective? Perhaps from your education, work or personal life? (Confirm participant’s educational background – university education/field?)
5. Please describe a recent situation where you have drawn upon any understandings, knowledge, skills or sensitivities you have about international or cross-cultural issues.
6. What do you think the challenges of international and intercultural communication are from a professional perspective? from a personal perspective?
7. Are there particular skills, knowledge or experiences in relation to internationalisation or intercultural competence you seek in an employee?
8. If you had two public relations graduates applying for the same position with similar backgrounds and qualifications, would it make a difference if one had:
 - Travelled abroad on a gap year?
 - Worked in a public relations capacity in another country for a year?
 - Worked abroad but not in public relations?
 - Spent some or all of their university studies in another country?
 - Spoke another language?
9. What international experience and intercultural competence do you expect a recent university public relations graduate to have?
10. Do you have any ideas about how universities could do more to internationalise the perspectives of their students?
11. [Good to summarise your understanding of their perspective]. Are there any other comments you would like to make?